



New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison (played by Kevin Costner) is confronted by reporters in film.

Two views on JFK, the movie

Stone as careless with truth as his hero

Attacks on film are unwarranted

JOHN P. MACKENZIE
NEW YORK TIMES

In an unworthy attempt to showcase his personal theories about the murder of John F. Kennedy, a self-promoter named Jim Garrison, the New Orleans district attorney in 1967, concocted conspiracy charges against a retired local businessman named Clay Shaw.

Garrison alleged that the crime in Dallas had been hatched in New Orleans by Shaw, Lee Harvey Oswald and another man.

Two years later a jury, after a monthlong trial and a closing oration from Garrison, took only 50 minutes to acquit.

The jurors concluded that, whatever doubts they might have had about the Warren Commission's finding that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone, Garrison had utterly failed to link Shaw to any crime.

Perjury case

A day later the unchastened D.A. filed a perjury case, charging Shaw with lying when he denied meeting with or knowing his alleged co-conspirators. A federal judge took the rare step of finding "bad faith" on Garrison's part and enjoined the second prosecution.

Shaw died in 1974, thus ending his own suit charging a malicious Garrison prosecution and gross violation of his constitutional rights. He had a strong case of fabricated evidence, perjured testimony and abuse of power over the local legal machinery.

In fact Garrison's sins were worse than that: he had appropriated another human being to make a self-serving political statement.

Oliver Stone's new movie JFK not only fails to concede this evil but perpetuates it.

About the only suggestion of a moral problem for the prosecutor, played by Kevin Costner, is expressed by his alienated wife, played by Sissy Spacek. She accuses her husband of picking on Shaw because he's gay and supposedly vulnerable. But by the end of 3 hours and 20 minutes on the screen, she too accepts the "value" of his mission.

Stone is as careless with the truth as his hero. He depicts the prosecutor's fabrications as actual events, and adds fabrications of his own. Like the D.A., Stone is indifferent to the rights of the accused and cynical in denying Shaw his humanity.

The movie is ostensibly dedicated to truth; instead it revives a

malicious prosecution and, like the prosecutor, uses Shaw to promote a theory of grand conspiracy.

Allegations of conspiratorial meetings with Oswald and others, which would have convicted Shaw if the jury had believed them, are portrayed on the screen as actually happening.

The movie also depicts as true a policeman's contention that Shaw, after his arrest, admitted using the alias "Clay Bertrand."

Since the shadowy Bertrand was a prime Garrison suspect, Shaw would hardly have given that incriminating answer.

Indeed, the officer's testimony was so preposterous that Judge Edward Hagerty ruled it inadmissible partly because it was unbelievable. That was an astonishing act of incredulity almost unheard of on that particular local bench.

Yet the film portrays the judge's action as finicky obstructionism.

These inventions exceed even the questionable liberties enjoyed by television "docudrama."

In docudrama, some scenes and even some characters may be created for dramatic reasons or to tell a real-life story more clearly. But it is dismaying to see entire episodes presented as true, especially episodes that have been virtually laughed out of court.

Stone glosses quickly over the jury's ringing "not guilty," strikes up triumphal music and ends the film with a written epilogue. It says that in 1979, Richard Helms, who was director of central intelligence at the time of the Shaw prosecution, admitted that contrary to the defendant's testimony, Shaw had "worked for" the CIA, one of Garrison's perceived conspirators.

What Helms said

But all Helms said was that Shaw was a CIA "contact," like many businessmen and academics who are sometimes debriefed on returning from abroad.

Oswald is accurately quoted as contending before he was shot that he was a "patsy" in the Kennedy case, a victim of a frame-up.

Prosecutors and historians will long debate whether he was indeed the fall guy arrested to divert attention from a monstrous global conspiracy. What they are not morally free to do is make a patsy out of someone like Shaw to advance those theories and schemes.

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BOSTON GLOBE

WASHINGTON — Before you see the film JFK (which, if you've any sense, you will), you should know something about the city that lurks and hovers menacingly throughout Oliver Stone's riveting tale of murder and deceit — Washington.

It's important because of an ironic twist to the politics of Stone's latest work, which, as art, is simply magnificent; as historical drama, is honest on a level few here will understand, and, as polemic, is devastatingly effective.

Unsolved murder

This is the city whose best and brightest failed to solve the assassination of a president to the public's satisfaction, and to the minimum standards of thoroughness and logic, despite nearly a decade of all-out support for its official investigation from the journalistic and political establishments.

And yet, after nearly two decades of continual pummeling of the still-official version in the world of print (suffered nearly in silence), much of the town is aghast at the appearance of this film and has taken after Stone with a vengeance.

The irony is multiple and ludicrous. The town whose main industry has been failing with monotonous regularity since the day John Kennedy was murdered dares to condemn a dramatization of one of its most despicable failures.

The town whose paralyzed government is the deserved butt of national humor doesn't even understand that its media mobilization against Stone can only backfire spectacularly.

The town whose remaining defenders of the One-Lone-Nut-Murdered-By-One-Lone-Nut version of the crime (including, by the way, presidents and Congresses who routinely refuse to reopen the case) insist that the rest of us believe them and also refuse to help make public the reams of evidence in the case that will otherwise remain locked up until the year 2029.

As ever undeterred by its ridiculous position, Washington's attack upon Stone consists of two major points:

■ He alleges a conspiracy so vast

(military, intelligence, industrial, right-wing fruitcake, Cuban exiles, the FBI, Texas authorities, even Lyndon Johnson) as to be ridiculous.

Stone does no such thing to my eyes. In his spellbinding blend of drama, documentary, and even dramatized documentary, he suggests possibilities through his characters and then illustrates them. His point of view is clearly that Kennedy's murder originated in military-intelligence opposition to post-Cuban-missile-crisis changes in policy away from the Cold War, against a second invasion of Castro's Cuba, and, above all, against Vietnam.

However, Stone leaves one free to accept all or none of his suggestions; only elitist Washington would assume a mass audience of zombies, incapable of viewing a political film carefully and critically.

■ He has built his story around a fabricated hero — Jim Garrison, the former New Orleans district attorney — who was an incompetent buffoon who slandered a local businessman in the pursuit 24 years ago of an imagined network of assassination conspirators in the city's low-life community.

Not so. JFK's Garrison was visible and large warts, and is well within the boundaries of dramatic license as portrayed by Kevin Costner. The passage of time, moreover, has strengthened the real Garrison's basic case. The businessman (the late Clay Shaw) lied in denying ties to the CIA, and witnesses insist to this day they saw him with Lee Harvey Oswald and the bizarre character Garrison believed drove to Texas in time for the assassination to be the real killers' getaway pilot (the late David Ferrie).

Warping tools

History is not always what is left when falsehoods and rumors are professionally discarded; history can also be the product of political power's warping tools. The Warren Commission's 28-year-old report is at least in part that: it failed in its declared purpose long ago.

In conversations here and in California, Stone told me he sees JFK as myth in the classical sense of the term, meaning allegory that points to an inner truth.

As such, it is credible: it is honest. Stone asks us to consider the possibility that Kennedy's murder was, in effect or in fact, a coup d'état. We don't have to, but it is interesting that Washington's attack on him does not include any hint of a willingness to let us see that long-suppressed evidence.

For an interview with Oliver Stone and a review and other views of the film, see Pages E1 and E6.